

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Reference Code: | 2003/17/289 |
| Title: | Text of a statement made in the British House of Commons by William Whitelaw MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, during the course of a special adjournment debate on Northern Ireland. The statement focused on explosions in Belfast on 'Bloody Friday' (21 July, 1972), the subsequent intensification of measures taken against the IRA [Irish Republican Army] by security forces in Northern Ireland, and efforts to establish a new administration in Northern Ireland. |
| Creation Date(s): | 24 July, 1972 |
| Level of description: | Item |
| Extent and medium: | 3 pages |
| Creator(s): | Department of Foreign Affairs |
| Access Conditions: | Open |
| Copyright: | National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives. |

24th July 1972

Text of statement made in the House of Commons by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mr. William Whitelaw MP, during the course of a special adjournment debate on Northern Ireland. A statement made by Mr. Merlyn Rees MP is also included.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. William Whitelaw):

This is a short debate arranged at short notice, I believe for the convenience of the House, about the serious events in Northern Ireland over the last weekend. I shall seek to meet the mood of a short debate by making a short speech in order to allow as many other hon. and right hon. Members who wish to take part to do so. I hope also in these circumstances that it will be thought right if I do not give way to too many interruptions of one sort or another but allow my hon. Friend at the end of the debate to reply to any points which may be raised.

As the House will know, the City and people of Belfast suffered a murderous sequence of explosions last Friday. Most of the 27 explosions in Belfast that day occurred within a 3½ hour period in the afternoon - at a time when, and at places where, high civilians casualties must have been expected and intended. No adequate warnings were given. Nine civilians and two soldiers were killed and about 130 civilians injured, many gravely. I need hardly point out that all sections of the community were indiscriminately affected by these outrages.

Of the nine dead two were Roman Catholics; of the 130 injured at least 40 were Roman Catholics; of the casualties 53 were men and boys and 77 were women and girls.

The full horror of these events will have been seen by many hon. Members on television, and from what I saw over the weekend of some of the damage I do not believe that what was shown was an exaggeration of what happened. I am sure the House will wish to join with me in expressing sympathy to the families of all those involved in this wanton attack on innocent men, women and children. I am grateful for the immediate support given to Her Majesty's Government at the time by the Leader of the Opposition on television and since by the hon. Member for Leeds, South (Mr. Merlyn Rees).

After the appallingly bloodthirsty and criminal events of last Friday there cannot be any remaining shred of support for the men who perpetrated them. Even those sections of Roman Catholic opinion throughout the world which have traditionally identified themselves with, and, perhaps, sometimes given the benefit of the doubt to any group of men who claim to speak for the Irish Republican movement can surely no longer continue to uphold the men who were responsible for Friday's horrible catalogue of slaughter.

Supporters of the Republican movement in this country, in Northern Ireland, in the United States and elsewhere, will no doubt notice the revulsion in some sections in the Irish Republic. Hon. Members will have seen, for example, an article in the Dublin Sunday Independent of yesterday in which the editor condemned Friday's terrorist brutality in the strongest possible terms. I think I should quote some of his words:

"We cannot change the past, however much we regret its record. But if we wish to restore the honour of our people, now is the time to act. We must break the paralysis which leaves the good name of the Irish people in the hands of unscrupulous men. And we must find a way to make restitution for our failings."

Since parliament at the end of March entrusted the Government with complete responsibility for all administration in Northern Ireland we have made the most patient and reasoned effort to secure the end of violence. No one can deny that. No one can deny, therefore, that Her Majesty's Government have now an absolutely unchallengeable right to ask the House, the country and, indeed, the whole world for their support in an absolute determination to destroy the capacity of the Provisional IRA for further acts of inhumanity. It has degraded the human race, and it must now be clear to all that its sole objective is to promote its aims by violence and by violence alone. Let no one be taken in by the propaganda that this organisation puts out in its constant campaign to discredit the security forces. I have seen examples of it already, and I hope that the media will not be deluded by it.

We are dealing not with a struggle between two communities but with a force that is the enemy of them both. I very much agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Sandys) who said on 10th July that the breakdown of the truce meant not that our policy of reconciliation was in any way mistaken but that our patience and tolerance would give us moral strength and popular backing to adopt a policy of greater firmness if and when we considered it appropriate.

Since the ceasefire, as I told the House last Thursday, the Army took measures to protect civilian life and its own position in Lenadoon. It has also on other occasions taken action to prevent intimidation of Catholic families in other areas. Immediately the Secretary of State for Defence and I arrived in Belfast on Friday evening we authorised intensified military operations against the Provisional IRA. Since then the security forces have carried out a number of searches for arms, explosives and terrorists not only in Belfast but throughout the whole of Northern Ireland. Over the weekend they have succeeded in locating more than half a ton of explosives, much bomb-making equipment, 2,000 rounds of ammunition, 19 weapons, and the IRA Land Rover which had been used in the Ballymurphy area. Twenty-three barricades in the Falls, Ballymurphy and Anderstonstown areas of Belfast and in Armagh have been removed.

In the 24-hour period ending on Saturday morning the security forces were involved in 103 shooting incidents but in the two succeeding 24-hour periods the number dropped to 58 and then to 22. A large number of hits on gunmen have been claimed, 26 since Friday in addition to more than 150 since the end of the ceasefire. Considerable numbers of people have been arrested on suspicion. Of these 30 have been charged with criminal offences, and the rest have been released, except for eight who are in custody and two whom I have detained.

These operations will, unfortunately, mean danger and inconvenience and some hardship to innocent people in certain areas. But in the face of the outrages committed last Friday I believe that the people will see such measures to be necessary and justified and that they will support the security forces in their difficult task. They must know that unless violence in their area can be ended there can be only misery ahead for them and for the whole of Northern Ireland.

At this stage I pay tribute to the Army, including the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, on whom the burden of carrying these measures through is very considerable.

I want now to tell the House of the twin objectives of Her Majesty's Government policy in Northern Ireland. Our first objective must be to destroy the capacity of the Provisional IRA to terrorise the community. There can be no hope of any future for the people of Northern Ireland if this terror is allowed to dominate the situation. In destroying the Provisional IRA's capacity to terrorise the community, it must be our objective to maintain the understanding and good will of all communities in Northern Ireland, and I know that the minority community feel an equal sense of the shock and horror of last Friday's attacks as there is throughout the community.

Our second objective is to pursue urgently our aim of finding a new basis for the administration of Northern Ireland in which the minority will have a true part to play and in which we can work towards measures that benefit Northern Ireland as a whole rather than favouring one community or another. It is no doubt the object of the Provisional IRA to disrupt our search for this solution. But I must tell the House that the Government are not prepared to see their efforts towards searching for a political solution disrupted or interrupted by terrorism. I have already begun the consultations which I mentioned earlier to the House with a view to setting up a conference of political parties in Northern Ireland to see what common ground can be found in the working out of a political solution. This week I have arranged to see Mr. Faulkner and to discuss the conference with representatives of the Alliance Party, the Republican Labour Party, the Liberal Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party. I have also invited representatives of the Social Democratic and Labour Party to discuss these matters with me, and such discussions will continue. The restoration of peace and confidence is, clearly, essential for the final setting up of new political institutions, but I am not prepared to be halted in the search for these by acts of terrorism.

It must be the duty of everyone in Northern Ireland who cares for the future of the community not to allow himself to be provoked. In this connection I was very glad to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Stratton Mills) had spoken out strongly against the Vanguard proposal for a rent and rates strike. I was also pleased to note that he was very strongly supported by the former Minister of Development in the Northern Ireland Government, Mr. Bradford, who said that it would be madness to obstruct the Government and the security forces at the present time. Some other Unionist leaders have spoken likewise.

Last Friday surely proved to the House, to all people - the North and South of Ireland, and indeed, to people throughout the world, that the tragic events of that day were not the actions of a minority community seeking to redress grievances which, rightly or wrongly, they harbour as a result of the past. These must surely be obvious as the methods employed by a small group of killers who will stop at nothing in pursuit of their aims and who care nothing for innocent human life.

In these circumstances, I confidently ask the House for its support in the continuing military measures which Her Majesty's Government will take against the Provisional IRA and, indeed, also for the political objectives of Her Majesty's Government in Northern Ireland.